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Putin calls Iranian, Israeli leaders in bid to de-escalate crisis

• SCO, Pakistan condemn 'external interference', sanctions; Munich Security Conference rescinds Iran invitation • US bolsters regional presence • Smuggled Starlink devices used to bypass Tehran's internet blackout

MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday moved to mediate the escalating crisis involving Iran on Friday, holding separate telephone calls with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian in an effort to "quickly de-escalate tensions".

The Kremlin stated that Putin during both phone calls expressed Moscow's willingness to "continue its mediation efforts and to promote constructive dialogue with the participation of all interested states".

Pezeshkian briefed Putin on Tehran's efforts to stabilise the situation, blaming the US and Israel for fomenting unrest.

The two men confirmed their commitment to a 20-year strategic partnership agreement signed last year, which includes joint economic projects, it added.

Meanwhile, fears of an immediate US attack have retreated slightly since President Donald Trump noted killings were easing, however, White House spokesperson Karoline Leavitt noted the president was keeping "all of his options on the table".

The US has redirected an aircraft carrier and its strike group toward Iran. The USS Abraham Lincoln is carrying fighter jets, guided missile destroyers and at least one attack submarine. The Israeli spy chief was also expected to meet White House envoy Steve Witkoff on Friday.

On the ground in Iran, a deadly state crackdown appears to have broadly quelled protests for now. While state media reported more arrests on Friday, residents in Tehran noted the capital had been quiet since Sunday.

Munich conference scraps invite

Amid the crackdown, the Munich Security Conference withdrew its invitation to Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi for its upcoming forum.

"In light of current events, the Munich Security Conference will not be maintaining these invitations," organisers said in a statement. Diplomatic reactions varied globally. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) condemned external interference and blamed Western economic pressure for the instability.

On the other hand, Pakistan urged the UN Security Council to uphold international law regarding non-interference. Ambassador Asim Ahmad, the permanent representative of Pakistan to the UN, warned that unilateral actions would only deepen the crisis. "We sincerely hope that the situation in Iran will soon return to calm and normalcy, free from any internal turmoil or external pressure," Ahmad said, calling Iran a "brotherly country" and urging all parties to resolve differences through peaceful means.

Starlink behind the scenes

Elon Musk-owned SpaceX's Starlink satellite service has emerged as a primary tool for Iranian dissidents to bypass state-imposed internet blackouts following a violent crackdown on protests, according to activists and researchers.

The network, which uses thousands of low-orbit satellites to beam internet to terminals the size of a pizza box, has become a crucial lifeline for demonstrators.

Digital rights groups estimate 50,000 terminals have been smuggled into Iran, defying a law that bans the unlicensed technology. As Iran attributes the country's tensions to foreign involvement, the extensive scale of this Starlink network implies that it may be receiving sophisticated external support.

Given the difficulty of transporting large quantities of restricted hardware across Iran's tightly controlled borders, the logistics mirror the capabilities of foreign intelligence services; however, no official link has been confirmed. —Agencies/Monitoring Desk

China, Canada reach 'landmark' deal

BEIJING: Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney and Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed on a raft of measures from trade to tourism on Friday at the first meeting between the countries' leaders in Beijing in eight years.

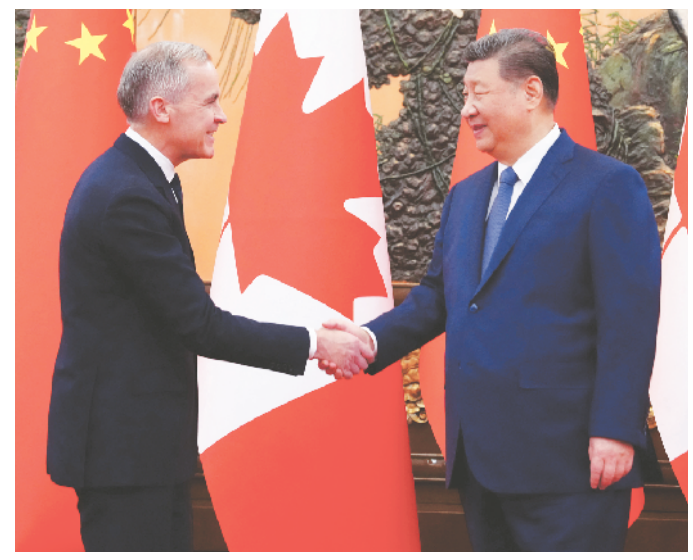
The Canadian premier hailed a "landmark deal" under a "new strategic partnership" with China, turning the page on years of diplomatic spats, retaliatory arrests of each other's citizens and tariff disputes.

Carney has sought to reduce his country's reliance on the United States, its key economic partner and traditional ally, as President Donald Trump has aggressively raised tariffs on Canadian products.

"Canada and China have reached a preliminary but landmark trade agreement to remove trade barriers and reduce tariffs," Carney told a news conference after meeting with Xi.

Under the deal, China — which used to be Canada's largest market for canola seed — is expected to reduce tariffs on canola products by March 1 to around 15 per cent, down from the current 84pc.

China will also allow Canadian visitors to enter the country visa-free.



CANADIAN PM Mark Carney shakes hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the People's Great Hall in Beijing.—Reuters

In turn, Canada will import 49,000 Chinese electric vehicles (EVs) under new, preferential tariffs of 6.1pc.

"This is a return to the levels that existed prior to recent trade frictions," Carney said of the EV deal.

US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer said the Canadian government's decision to allow up to 49,000 Chinese electric vehicles at a low tariff rate is "problematic" and said Canada may come to regret the decision. "I think it's problematic for Canada," Greer told *CNBC* on Thursday.

Welcoming Carney in the Great Hall of the People, Xi said China-Canada relations reached a turning point at their last meeting on the sidelines of the APEC summit in October. "It can be said that our meeting last year opened a new chapter in turning China-Canada relations toward improvement," Xi told the Canadian leader.

"The healthy and stable development of China-Canada relations serves the common interests of our two countries," he said, adding he was "glad" to see discussions over the last few months to restore cooperation.

Ties between the two nations withered in 2018 over Canada's arrest of the daughter of Huawei's founder on a US warrant, and China's retaliatory detention of two Canadians on espionage charges.

The two countries imposed tariffs on each other's exports in the years that ensued, with China also accused of interfering in Canada's elections.

But Carney has sought a pivot, and Beijing has also said it is willing to get relations back on "the right track".

Canada, traditionally a staunch US ally, has been hit especially hard by Trump's steep tariffs on steel, aluminium, vehicles and lumber.

Washington's moves have prompted Canada to seek business elsewhere.—Agencies

New map uncovers hidden terrain beneath Antarctic ice

Researchers identify more than 30,000 previously uncharted hills

WASHINGTON: Scientists have devised the most detailed map to date of the terrain hidden below the vast ice sheet blanketing Antarctica, uncovering an exuberant landscape of mountains, canyons, valleys and plains while discerning for the first time tens of thousands of hills and other smaller features.

The researchers used the latest high-resolution satellite observations and a method called ice-flow perturbation analysis, which estimates subglacial topography and conditions based on surface features, to map the full continent including previously uncharted parts.

Improved knowledge of the subglacial bedrock landscape may aid in forecasts concerning the climate-related retreat of Antarctica's ice sheet. Previous research indicated that rough terrain like jagged hillsides and mountaintops can slow this retreat.

"Having the most accurate map of Antarctica's bed shape is crucial, because the shape of the bed is an important control on friction acting against ice flow, which in turn we need to include in numerical models that are used to project how rapidly Antarctica's ice will flow towards the ocean, melt and contribute to global sea-level rise," said glaciologist Robert Bingham of the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, who helped lead the study published this week in the journal *Science*.

The researchers were able to map the subglacial terrain with unprecedented precision. For instance, they identified more than 30,000 previously uncharted hills, defined as terrain protuberances of at least 165 feet (50 metres).

Antarctica is about 40 per cent larger than Europe, 50pc larger than the United States and roughly half the area of Africa.

The Antarctic Ice Sheet is the largest mass of ice on Earth and holds about 70pc of the planet's freshwater. Its average thickness is estimated at about 1.3 miles (2.1km), with a maximum thickness of about three miles (4.8km).

Antarctica has not always been covered in ice. Its subglacial features initially were sculpted before the continent acquired its icy covering more than 34 million years ago before being further modified by the dynamic ice sheet. Antarctica once was connected to South America but separated due to a process called plate tectonics involving the gradual movement of continent-sized plates on the Earth's surface.—Reuters

Gaza governance committee holds first meeting in Cairo

Trump to lead newly announced peace board

CAIRO: The Palestinian committee set to govern post-war Gaza held its first meeting in Cairo on Friday, according to Egyptian state-linked *Al-Qahera News*, while US President Donald Trump announced the formation of a "Board of Peace" to oversee Gaza's post-war administration.

The newly formed committee, comprising 15 members and led by former Palestinian Authority Deputy Minister Ali Shaath, is charged with managing day-to-day governance in the territory.

Meanwhile, Trump declared his position as the board's chair, noting that the other members will soon be announced.

"It is my Great Honor to announce that THE BOARD OF PEACE has been formed," Trump posted on Truth Social, adding that he will serve as its chair. "I can say with certainty that it is the Greatest and Most Prestigious Board ever assembled at any time, any place."

The second phase of the Trump-brokered deal seeks the "full demilitarisation and reconstruction of Gaza", according to US special envoy Steve Witkoff. However, the transition remains fragile. Gaza's Hamas-run health ministry reported that Israeli forces have killed 451 people since the ceasefire ostensibly took effect on Oct 10.

The US plan also envisions an International Stabilisation Force to assist in securing the territory and training vetted Palestinian police units. Trump noted that Egypt, Turkey, and Qatar will assist in securing a "comprehensive demilitarisation agreement" to dismantle tunnels and seize weapons.

Critics and experts have noted that Trump's role as chair of the governing board resembles a colonial structure. Despite these concerns, the US remains the primary guarantor as the peace plan moves into this next stage

While the first phase secured the return of nearly all hostages, the remains of one Israeli, Ran Gvili, have not been retrieved. Witkoff warned on Wednesday that Washington expects Hamas to "comply fully with its obligations," including the return of Gvili's body.

Fundamental disputes persist between the warring parties. Hamas has refused to commit to full disarmament, which Israel maintains is a non-negotiable demand.

Meanwhile, Palestinian leaders have prioritised a full Israeli military withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, a step for which no detailed timetable has been established.—Agencies

India liquidates Chabahar stakes over Trump's tariff threat

The Economic Times claims New Delhi now has 'no liability' in the project, and Tehran is free to use the funds independently

NEW DELHI: Responding to renewed US sanctions, India transferred approximately $120 million to Iran to fully liquidate its financial commitment for developing Chabahar port, a key gateway to landlocked Afghanistan, *The Economic Times* said on Friday.

A government source stated that India now has "no liability" in its commitment and that Iran is free to use the funds independently.

In October last year, India was granted a six-month exemption from US sanctions on the port. New Delhi and Tehran signed a contract to develop and equip the long-stalled Chabahar project in 2024, giving India 10 years of access.

Following the reimposition of sanctions, the state-owned entity India Ports Global Ltd (IPGL) effectively exited the project.

Government directors resigned en masse, and its website was taken down to "insulate everybody associated with the port from potential sanctions". A government source concluded, "India has no choice but to exit the Chabahar port".

The collapse followed US President Donald Trump's January 12, 2026, warning that any country doing business with Iran would face a 25 per cent tariff on all business with the United States.

The decision, say officials, was driven by a stark cost-benefit analysis under immense US pressure. Combined with existing punitive tariffs, this could have raised total duties on Indian exports to the US to as high as 75pc.

The value of protecting Chabahar (with bilateral India-Iran trade at about $1.68bn) paled in comparison to the risk of losing access to the US market.

The US had already crippled the project by reimposing sanctions on the port effective September 29, 2025. India's transfer of funds and operational wind-down were designed to secure a temporary six-month sanctions exemption from the US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). This was a tactical move to avoid secondary sanctions on Indian entities.

Indian officials sought to downplay the direct trade impact, noting that Iran is not among India's top 50 trading partners, accounting for only about 0.15pc of India's overall trade.

This made the strategic project easier to sacrifice in the face of a broader US trade confrontation.

With the surrender, India loses a critical gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia that allowed it to bypass Pakistan, undermining years of diplomatic and financial investment aimed at expanding regional influence.

The episode also starkly reveals the limits of India's "multi-alignment" policy. When confronted with a direct clash between US demands and its partnership with Iran, India chose to capitulate to Washington, potentially damaging its credibility as a reliable, independent strategic partner, analysts say.

There's a view that India's withdrawal creates a vacuum in Chabahar's development that China, with its deeper pockets and greater willingness to defy US sanctions, is well-positioned to fill. This could further expand China's influence in the Indian Ocean region.

While the overall trade volume with Iran is small, specific sectors like basmati rice exports (where Iran is India's largest market) face immediate disruption due to payment delays and shipment uncertainties, reports said.

India's business sources say the apparent "flip-flop" on Chabahar is not a capricious policy change but a forced retreat.

It underscores a painful reality: when confronted with a binary choice between safeguarding its vital economic ties with the United States and preserving a strategically important but economically secondary project with Iran, New Delhi will prioritise the former.

The move secures short-term economic relief but at the cost of a long-term strategic vision, highlighting the persistent vulnerability of middle powers in an increasingly polarised world order.—Correspondent

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